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Citation for published version:

Neal, A 2012, 'Events Dear Boy, Events': Terrorism and Security from the Perspective of Politics' Critical Studies on Terrorism, vol. 5, no. 1, pp. 107-120. DOI: 10.1080/17539153.2012.659919

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/17539153.2012.659919](https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2012.659919)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Early version, also known as pre-print

Published In:

Critical Studies on Terrorism

Publisher Rights Statement:

© Neal, A. (2012). 'Events Dear Boy, Events': Terrorism and Security from the Perspective of Politics. Critical Studies on Terrorism, 5(1), 107-120doi: 10.1080/17539153.2012.659919

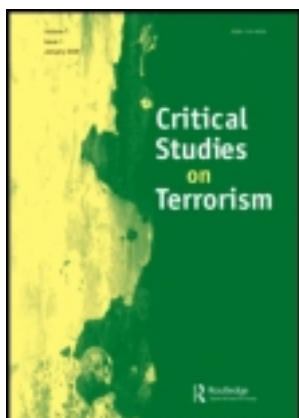
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Critical Studies on Terrorism

Publication details, including instructions for authors and
subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rter20>

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Available online: 10 Apr 2012

To cite this article: Andrew W. Neal (2012): 'Events dear boy, events': terrorism and security from
the perspective of politics, *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, 5:1, 107-120

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2012.659919>

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ARTICLE

‘Events dear boy, events’: terrorism and security from the perspective of politics

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This article asks what it would mean to consider terrorism and security from the perspective of politics. It argues that security politics – defined as the activity of politicians when connected in some way to security – has been largely excluded from existing scholarly approaches to terrorism and security. In contrast to the assumptions about existential threat and sovereign/executive power characteristic of existing approaches, the article argues that if we consider security in terms of what is at stake for politicians, then it can no longer be considered as separate from ‘normal’ politics. From the perspective of politics, security events are just like other politically salient events.

Keywords: terrorism; security; politics; events; securitisation

Introduction

In the 10 years of scholarship on terrorism and security since 9/11, there has been a heavy focus from some quarters on the nature of threats and a heavy focus from others on the critique of sovereign power and security governance. Following the nomenclature of this journal, we might call these two strands ‘traditional’ security scholarship and ‘critical’ security scholarship, although such categories are always fuzzy and contestable. This article argues that there is something missing from the attentions of both, and that is security politics. By politics, I mean the activity of professional politicians (Weber 1994, Palonen 2006), rather than simply governments or political leaders, and by security politics, I mean when this activity relates to security in some way, whether objectively, discursively or by some other connection. My argument is that despite their differences, traditional security scholarship and critical security scholarship perform the same classic security trope: that security is an existential realm of sovereign or executive prerogative. The assumption is that if we want to understand security, we need to analyse how political leaders and the executive branch of government conceive, identify and tackle security threats. This trope leads to the analytical exclusion of security politics.

This matters because there is a great deal of activity by politicians relating to terrorism and security that does not fall under the umbrella of sovereign or executive power. For example, security policies have been contested in national parliaments; members of legislatures have set up inquiries and committees (for example, on extraordinary rendition (Intelligence and Security Committee 2007) or fast-track legislation (House of Lords Select

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Committee on the Constitution 2009)); and politicians have published reports (such as the 9/11 commission report (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States *et al.* 2004)), scrutinised military and intelligence service budgets and fought elections at least in part on national security tickets. This activity, understood as *security politics*, involves backbench politicians, opposition parties and political leaders and ministers in their capacity as politicians rather than as executive office holders.

In the aftermath of 9/11 and other spectacular acts of political violence since, terrorism and security scholarship has been understandably drawn to focus on executive and governmental responses, some of which have been equally spectacular. Such responses to perceived security emergencies do appear to adhere to the classic sovereign security trope in the short term, with executive prerogative asserted, critical deliberation sidelined and concerns about liberties and rights pushed aside (Medical Foundation for the Care of the Victims of Torture *et al.* 2001, Chang 2002, Goldberg *et al.* 2002, Bamford 2004, Liberty 2004, Scheuerman 2006, Hewitt 2008). But the passing of 10 years since 9/11 has seen this short-term logic fade and more diverse forms of politics return. Ten years has allowed a broader range of political activities relating to security to play out, and the classic sovereign security trope does not do them analytical justice.

The classic trope assumes, implicitly or explicitly, that security transcends ‘normal’ politics because of its existential importance. The trope ultimately derives from Hobbes and finds repeated expression to the present day. In Hobbes there can be no industry, arts or anything of civilised value without security, and therefore the security provided by the sovereign must be the first freedom in any modern state (Hobbes 1996, p. 89). Versions of this trope are reproduced in Locke, Montesquieu, Hume, Smith, Bentham, Mill and Schmitt (for overviews, see Hussein 2003, pp. 16–22, Neocleous 2008, pp. 11–38). It is Carl Schmitt who constructs the starkest argument for a necessary link between sovereign security prerogative and existential threat on the basis of the inevitability of ‘the exception’: ‘a case of extreme peril, a danger to the existence of the state, or the like . . . It is precisely the exception that makes relevant the subject of sovereignty, that is, the whole question of sovereignty’ (Schmitt 1985, p. 6). The idea of ‘the exception’ has been subject to intense legal and political debate and is beyond the scope of this article (Fitzpatrick 2003, Huysmans 2004, 2008, Agamben 2005, Johns 2005, Prozorov 2005, Tierney 2005, Gross and Ni Aoláin 2006, Neal 2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2010, Doty 2007), but what concerns us here is the sovereign security prerogative as expressed repeatedly in modern Western political thought and practice. The classic trope assumes that the existential realm of security is of such importance that normal politics and law should give way to sovereign or executive power in order to deal with security threats.

The analytical and political effect of this trope is the reification of sovereign or executive power as the fundamental security actor, excluding a wider analysis of *security politics*. It also has the effect of separating the realm of security from ‘normal’ politics. The trope can be performed in a variety of ways, but the effect is the same. It can be performed philosophically, as in the work of Agamben (1998, 2005). It can be performed discursively or sociologically in the vein of securitisation studies (Wæver 1995, Buzan *et al.* 1998, Balzacq 2011). Or it can be reproduced through its critique in the name of human security or emancipation (Booth 1991, Fierke 2007, pp. 186–205). The performance of the trope creates an analytical blind spot regarding security politics and an incomplete picture of the workings of security. It diverts attention from the multiple ways in which professional politicians mobilise and organise around security issues, the ways they contest rather than make policy, the diversity of political discourse beyond executive pronouncements and

the sheer breath of professional political activity that does not simply defer to executive security prerogative.

Most significantly, the existential logic of the classic sovereign security trope conceals the quite different political logics that may be at work in the activity of professional politicians. The point is not to question whether security threats are really existential or not, although this can certainly be a feature of political security debates. This would be to play into an old debate on objective/subjective security introduced by Wolfers (1952): a condition of objective security or insecurity being impossible to measure except perhaps in hindsight and subjective security being a psychological condition measured only by its deviation from 'reality' (Buzan and Hansen 2009, pp. 32–33; see, for example, Mueller 2005). The point is that existential survival of the state, nation or any other publicly articulated referent object is not necessarily the primary stake for professional politicians involved in the activity of security politics.

This article therefore asks what it would mean to rethink security from the perspective of *politics*, rather than through the critique of sovereign, executive or governmental power. What happens to our understanding of security if we refuse its separation from 'normal' politics? What happens if instead of beginning with the problem of existential threat (its identification, declaration, contestation and apprehension), we consider security politics in terms of the stakes involved for politicians? This move potentially undermines the reification of sovereign power performed by terrorism and security studies, critical or otherwise. The article will argue that understanding security from the perspective of politics means that what is at stake is not existential survival but *political* survival. This has very different implications for security analysis.

The first part of the article makes some further qualifications about the meaning of *security politics* and considers its exclusion from scholarship in more depth. The second part critiques securitisation theory as a sophisticated example of this exclusion. And the final part proposes an alternative theoretical framing for understanding security from the perspective of politics.

Security politics and its exclusion

A few qualifications are necessary first. By 'security politics' I do not mean the wider critique of what is *political* about security. Security practices, security policies and security discourses are all political in the sense that they implicate power relations and can be critiqued and politicised as such. The potential scope of what is political about the problem of security is ever expanding thanks to a broad range of critical scholarship, from feminist approaches that unpack the gendered power relations of security practices (Hansen 2000, Richter-Montpetit 2007) to analyses of proliferating techniques of security governance such as risk management, insurance, bordering and surveillance (Vaughan-Williams 2007, Amoores and de Goede 2008, Salter 2008a, Basaran 2010, Lobo-Guerrero 2011). Jef Huysmans argues that such contest over the political meaning of security calls into question not only the identification of security threats but also the nature and limits of political community itself. For example, contest over the relationship between executive security prerogative and judicial application of human rights laws brings into question the proper relationship between the different branches of government (Huysmans 2006, pp. 11–12). The question of 'the political' is therefore an expansive one, expressed succinctly by the political scientist Colin Hay as follows: 'the political should be defined in such a way as to encompass the entire sphere of the social . . . All events, process and practices which occur within the social sphere have the potential to be political' (2002, p. 3).

In contrast to this expansive notion of ‘the political’, in this article I mean security politics in a narrow sense: the activity of politics as practised by politicians. I mean the kind of political activity examined by Max Weber in ‘The Profession and Vocation of Politics’, which considered the modern conditions under which the political activity of professional politicians takes place (Weber 1994). It is not my intention to privilege this notion of politics over any other, but rather to draw attention to its neglect in terrorism and security scholarship. The classic security trope does not capture the diverse ways in which politicians are called to engage with terrorism and security. Existing assumptions do not capture the full extent of the activity of security politics.

My grounds for problematising security politics stem from my ongoing empirical research on counterterrorist lawmaking in the British parliament (see Neal 2012a). This focuses on the arguments, practices and tactics of the full range of parliamentarians at different times, not only in the wake of perceived security emergencies but also when there is no perceived emergency and when such perceptions are fading into the political background. My core claim, based on an analysis of these unexpectedly diverse parliamentary discourses and activities, is that a whole sweep of political actors, namely politicians, have been excluded from the analysis of security because of an overwhelming focus on the executive branch of government, broadly understood. This analytical neglect of politicians not only is true of traditional strategic studies and international relations (IR) approaches in their state centrism and focus on executive decision makers (e.g. Waltz 1979, Vasquez 1993, p. 105) but is also true of much of critical terrorism and security studies in its critique of sovereign power, its deconstruction of government security policies and its empirical mapping of techniques of government. All these areas of analysis can be filed under the broad category of executive power, even when that power is devolved to bureaucracies, technical operatives or arms-length agencies (see Bigo 2002, Butler 2004, Amoores 2009). Politicians have been marginally included as ‘domestic factors’ in some approaches, for example, in foreign policy analysis (Hudson 2007, pp. 125–142). Politicians could also be considered through securitisation theory as a kind of ‘audience’ for executive security discourses (to which we will return), but almost no terrorism or security analysis has placed politicians and the activity and practice of *security politics* at its centre. To foreground security politics would mean considering not simply the leaders, ministers and governments whose statements and policies are often the focus of security analysis, but rather the whole range of politicians who are members of political institutions, such as legislatures in sovereign states and others such as those of the EU. There are strong empirical grounds to argue that security does not simply involve the decisions of sovereigns or expansive techniques of government, but mobilises and engages politicians in diverse ways.

The analytical neglect of security politics is largely due to the structure and evolution of academic disciplines. Terrorism and security studies developed as an extension of the discipline of IR and as such excludes the political activities of politicians, other than statesmen, leaders and key ministers, leaving this to the discipline of political science. But at the same time, political science has been happy to leave the analysis of security to security studies and IR, and when it has considered questions of security it has simply performed the classic sovereign security trope. The outcome is that a proper consideration of *security politics* has been excluded from both disciplines. But furthermore, beyond academic scholarship, politicians themselves defer heavily to the executive in the aftermath of spectacular acts of political violence, marginalising their own political activity and any reflexive consideration of the relationship between politics and security. *Security politics* is therefore subject to a triple exclusion: first, by terrorism and security studies as a sub-discipline of IR; second, by the discipline of political science; and third, by politicians themselves in their at times

uncritical reinforcement of sovereign or executive security prerogative. Let us unpack the three aspects of this exclusion a little more.

The identity of any academic discipline is constituted by what it includes and excludes. Buzan and Hansen argue that the boundaries of what they tellingly call '*international security studies*' (ISS) [emphasis added] have changed over time and have never been clearly defined. Sometimes its exclusions have been successfully challenged. As they argue:

ISS . . . does not have clearly defined borders. Instead it has 'frontier zones' where its debates blend into adjacent subjects, ranging from IR theory to IPE, to foreign policy analysis and Political Theory. (Buzan and Hansen 2009, p. 18)

In writing a history of ISS, Buzan and Hansen admit that they necessarily reproduce the history of its exclusions (2010, p. 661). However, it is notable that 'politics' is not included in the boundary subjects they list, suggesting that it has not even been registered by the discipline as excluded. This is not to suggest that security studies and its frontier zones are not political or consider no political questions, but rather that the activity of security politics as practised by politicians is missing.

Political science as a scholarly discipline, or more narrowly the academic study of the activity of politics, remains rather insulated from security studies, and vice versa. There has been little communication between them. Few security scholars will have engaged with the works of Philip Norton or Bernard Crick, who represent disciplinary staples in the study of politics, particularly of British parliamentary politics. When the discipline of 'politics' does engage with questions of security, it largely reproduces the classic sovereign security trope. For example, Bernard Crick, in the British classic 'In Defence of Politics', argues that in a 'state of emergency' open, free and consultative politics must be brushed aside in favour of 'the [sovereign] capacity to act without compromise or normal consultation' (Crick 1982, p. 27).

Beyond scholarly disciplines, my empirical research on counterterrorist lawmaking shows that politicians themselves perform and reproduce the classic security trope when they adhere to the constitutional convention of legislative consensus and deference to the executive at times of perceived emergency (Neal 2012a, 2012b). Politicians defer to, and therefore recognise and legitimise, the security prerogative of the sovereign. This means that at times of perceived emergency, there is a lack of open reflection by politicians on their own engagement in the activity and practice of security politics. From a different scholarly perspective, there is quantitative evidence that a post-attack 'rally round the flag effect' is a common phenomenon in Western democracies (Chowanietz 2011). However, this emergency political reaction does not encompass the whole of security politics, as the playing out of time beyond the aftermath of the 'emergency' reveals. When there is no perceived emergency, or when it is fading into the background, security politics becomes more critical, deliberative and reflexive.

The fundamental question implied by this exclusion is whether security politics is different or separate from 'normal' politics. Both the disciplines of politics and security studies/IR have perpetuated the separation of security from politics by reproducing the classic sovereign security trope. Security becomes a matter for the executive, not for politicians in general. For security studies/IR, the politics of politicians is of marginal concern compared with executive practices and the decisions of statesmen. For the discipline of politics, security begins where politics stops. This separation of security from the activity of politics is true of even the most sophisticated critical approaches to security, one of which we will look at now.

The separation of security from politics and the example of securitisation theory

Securitisation theory has been a growth area in security studies for the past two decades and has probably come closest to considering the role of politicians in the problem and practice of security. Yet at its core it is built on a separation of security from politics: the act of securitisation is conceived as the discursive movement of issues from the 'normal' sphere of politics to the 'exceptional' sphere of security by security elites (Buzan *et al.* 1998, p. 23). Securitisation is defined by urgency, crisis and exceptionality and thus set apart from mere politics (Buzan *et al.* 1998, p. 23).

The theory has formed the basis of a successful research programme for studying how issues and events get constructed and framed as security threats. Securitisation-based approaches analyse the statements of elites in terms of three things: first, security discourse/language (the grammar of security); second, institutional, historical and empirical context; and third, the 'audience' of securitising moves. This frame of analysis can be mapped quite neatly onto the field of politics as practised by politicians, but it is insufficient for understanding the empirical variety of political activity connected to security issues. The notion of discursive action that the theory is built upon is merely a sophisticated version of the classic sovereign security trope. The following criticisms all relate to the construction of the theory around sovereign security prerogative and its role in moving issues from the sphere of 'normal politics' to a rarefied realm of existential security, thus reproducing their separation.

First, as I and others have argued elsewhere, securitisation theory is elite led, and this in itself reproduces the classic sovereign security trope (Williams 2003, Neal 2010). The elite-led assumption is based, perhaps quite reasonably, on the empirical claim that it is usually the state or state elites who securitise (Wæver 1995, p. 51). However, this move is not simply an innocent reflection of the way security works, but a reproduction of a particular understanding of security that separates it from politics. It is true that securitisation theory does not consider speech acts to occur in a vacuum of pure decisionist freedom, but in a historical, discursive, institutional and material context. The theory conceptualises this as the 'felicity conditions' which affect the chances of success of a securitising speech act (Wæver 2000, pp. 252–253). These conditions can include the social capital of speakers, the institutionalisation of security responses, commensurability with existing discourses (such as racial fears and prejudices) and the presence of objective material conditions such as troops massing on the border or images of physical destruction. Nevertheless, the elite-led understanding of securitisation, even if contextualised, does not fully encompass the activity of politics and the diverse ways that it can be connected to security.

Second, securitisation and security politics are not synonymous. Securitisation is the discursive construction of security threats. This does happen of course, but it is one political phenomenon among many possible in security politics. Even if we accept the premise that all security problems are ultimately constructed, the problem is that this is too narrow an analytical lens for the study of political activity relating to security. Studying the activity of security politics does not require a formal definition of security, but rather a willingness to be analytically led by empirical political connections to security issues of all kinds, whether objective, subjective or discursive.

It is easy to think of examples of political activity that reference security but do not neatly fit the securitisation model. For example, parliamentary discussion of new evidence about the complicity in torture by the British security services is not a case of securitisation because it does not primarily involve the construction of a security threat. Individual speakers in such a debate may indeed attempt to construct 'the security threat' in a certain way, but framing analysis around this and its contestation will not analytically capture the full

scope and diversity of such political activity.¹ A parliamentary report hearing over a failed IT contract to build an 'E-borders' system is not a case of securitisation because the participants will be focused on ministerial decisions and allocation of budgets and contractual terms, even if, again, such a debate may feature specific attempts to characterise security threats (Home Affairs Committee 2011). Making the scrapping of ID cards a manifesto commitment is not a case of securitisation, or even for that matter desecuritisation, because although the debate about ID cards did involve discussion of their use to counter security threats (as well as a whole menu of other uses), this alone did not encompass the entirety of ID cards as a political issue (Huysmans and Buonfino 2008, The Conservative Party 2010).

Third, politicians cannot be reduced to the 'audience' of elite securitising moves. To reduce politicians to 'audience' would be to assume that politicians are mostly reactive in their political activity, responding to the securitising moves of leaders or ministers. Although this purely reactive modality does appear to exist during periods of political consensus following spectacular acts of political violence, it is certainly not always the case, as I have suggested above. More sociological developments of securitisation theory have tackled the 'audience' problem by stressing the iterative possibilities of security discourse, whereby security claims can be modified in the discursive interplay between groups (Stritzel 2007, p. 371, Salter 2008b, p. 321).

These sociological variants of securitisation theory have done much to reduce its elite-led basis and thus offer a potential way out of its reproduction of the classic sovereign security trope. For example, Thierry Balzacq offers a sophisticated rethinking of the theory, arguing that analysis of securitisation should focus on the degree of congruence between statements, discursive/institutional contexts and material events themselves (2011, pp. 6–14). Balzacq loosens many of the quite restrictive formal conditions of the original Copenhagen School conception of the theory. For example, in their 1998 *Security: a new framework for analysis*, Buzan *et al.* (1998) are quite explicit that securitisation means an 'issue is presented as an existential threat, requiring emergency measures and justifying actions outside the normal bounds of political procedure' (p. 23). Balzacq offers a lengthy redefinition of securitisation that I will not reproduce in full here. In place of speech acts it stresses a wide array of 'contextually mobilized . . . heuristic artefacts' such as metaphors, images, emotions and intuitions; in place of 'existential threat' it stresses 'critical vulnerability'; and in place of 'emergency measures' it stresses a 'customized policy . . . undertaken immediately' (Balzacq 2011, p. 3). Balzacq's reformulation is promising and takes securitisation theory quite far from its original conception, making it easier to fit the label 'securitization' to a wider variety of security-implicated situations. Even in this guise, however, the approach does not foreground the question of security politics, but rather includes it, along with potentially everything else, in the ever-expanding variables of 'context'. Moreover, it maintains the separation between the realm of security, even as expanded through broadened criteria, and the realm of 'normal' politics.

Even with a reduced emphasis on elite prerogative and existential threat, all forms of securitisation theory assume that security has a specific logic that makes it, at the very least, a special and distinct form of political activity. It takes security discourses, broadly conceived, at face value and treats them as signs of the logic of securitisation. This 'specialness' of security suggests that securitisation theory remains an extension of the disciplinary logic that constitutes security studies and IR as separate from political science. In this sense, securitisation remains an expression of the classic sovereign security trope. The defining, constitutive, organising stake in this logic is the construction of an existential threat (or critical vulnerability) to a referent object such as the state, society or environment and its connection to certain privileged actors and means of redress. And

although the innovation of securitisation theory is that ‘existential threat’ may be a discursive construction rather than an objective condition, it still assumes that the construction of existential threat is the central stake and that the prime mover is some form of nominalist security prerogative under certain conditions. However, if we were to understand terrorism and security from the perspective of the activity of politics, rather than on the basis of this classic sovereign security trope, the logic and stakes would look rather different.

Security from the perspective of politics

Although politicians may indeed perceive or construct security threats as an existential threat to some referent object or other, this is not necessarily their primary motivation and not necessarily what is at stake for them politically. We should not take their claims at face value for there may be a different political logic at work. From the perspective of professional politics, we might consider that the biggest ‘existential threat’ for politicians is not to a publicly cited referent object, but to the electoral life of a government or their own political careers. This is quite different.

Securitisation analysis, which focuses on the public articulation of security discourses and their reception and acceptance by particular audiences, cannot easily incorporate this logic. Politicians could not in all seriousness publicly invoke the political life of a government or their own political career as the referent object of securitisation. Although sociologically we can say that politicians often invoke and modulate discourses of existential threat, foregrounding this distracts from what is at stake in *security politics*, and indeed in politics generally. This hidden stake in security politics, existing behind publicly articulated discourses of security threat, makes security politics a ‘double game’, as conceptualised by Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu argues that apparent concern for the interests of the politically represented public often ‘conceals the relation of competition between the representatives’ (Bourdieu 1992, p. 183). For politicians, terrorism and security may well be urgent problems to be solved, constructed or not, but the conventions of cross-party consensus and deference to the executive involved may conceal partisan political strategies and forms of opportunism. Political parties are, after all, struggling to win elections and secure control of government, but perhaps dare not speak this openly on the sensitive issue of terrorism.

My argument is that the fear and threat that drive politicians and governments may not be existential but political. The survival at stake for politicians is not existential survival but political survival. This is because security events and the way they are handled or mishandled, regardless of whether constructed or not, can make or break a government. In fact this is true of all events. Rethinking security as a problem of politically important events, rather than in terms of sovereign or elite prerogative over existential threats, puts quite a different complexion on how we understand *security politics*.

In order to consider terrorism and security from the perspective of politics and to reflect what is at stake for politicians, we need a shift of ontology. What we need is a Machiavellian ontology, not a Hobbesian/Schmittian one as assumed by the classic sovereign security trope. This is a theoretical distinction I have previously made elsewhere (Neal 2010, p. 73), but one I would like to extend here. The key distinction is that in the statist ontology of Hobbes and Schmitt, the survival of the state, and thus the survival of the people within the state, is what is at stake. In Machiavelli the reign of the Prince is at stake, which is not the same thing. The reign of the Prince is akin to the reign of a government, not the survival of a state, people or indeed other referent object.

Under a Hobbesian/Schmittian ontology the state is sovereign. The state is not just politically sovereign, but ontologically sovereign. There are no higher forces at work than

the state, other than the necessities for state survival that the ontology implies. Although states can, with some difficulty, be destroyed, the ideal form of the state for Hobbes and Schmitt is a state in sovereign command of its fate. In this sense, the sovereign state is a mortal God. It decides what is a threat, decides what needs to be done about it and does it. In contrast, Machiavelli's Prince is not a mortal God. He remains subordinate to the superior forces of *fortuna* or fate (Machiavelli 1999, p. 84). The Prince may build defences against the vicissitudes of *fortuna* and learn historical lessons of how to perpetuate his reign, but *fortuna* will always win in the end. The Prince cannot master contingency forever and he cannot always be in command of the meaning of events. A Machiavellian ontology is the one we should apply to security politics.

The point is that the eventual failure of the Prince's reign is part of the rules of the game. This is very different to the existential security trope in which 'failure is not an option'. It is not that the Prince can fail and the state (or securitising elites) cannot, but that the stakes and rules of the game are different. Governments will fall as a matter of course. But in stable liberal democracies at least, this is not an existential catastrophe. Governments accept this as part of the rules of the game, as must the Prince. Politicians, including those out of power, know the rules, must play by them if they want to be successful and consider the game worth playing (Bourdieu 1992, p. 180). In the meantime governments must build their political defences and try to hold on to power. Governments always try to plan and control their programme in government, to stick to their policies, to not tilt. But they cannot anticipate what *fortuna* may throw at them, and this is not a problem of existential threat, but of unforeseen, politically significant events. As Harold Macmillan is reported to have said (possibly apocryphally), the things prime ministers fear the most, the things most likely to blow a government off course, are *events dear boy, events*. This captures the political stakes of security politics, and indeed all politics, rather well.

In a book on the discipline of politics, the political scientist Jean Blondel opens with a remarkably Machiavellian account of the role of events in politics. His argument is that in politics, enormous changes can occur because of knife-edge results, unforeseen events and accidents and scandals that take on a life of their own. For example, governments can fall on votes of no confidence by a margin of one because an MP happens to be ill and absent. This is what happened to Prime Minister James Callaghan in March 1979 (Blondel 1981, p. 1). Similarly, winner-takes-all elections that are too close to call can unprecedentedly swing on the decisions of Supreme Court judges, as with Bush and Gore in 2000. Governments can misinterpret and misjudge their ability to handle unforeseen events, as with the fall of the Spanish Aznar government in the wake of the Madrid bombings. Luck and an unknown number of unforeseen circumstances outside of individual or party control can make or break political careers, and Blondel suggests this is more so in politics than in any other walk of life. The unexpected death or resignation of a colleague can open up a space for a new leader or minister; a scandal blowing up out of nowhere can discredit an opponent; and bad weather affecting voter turnout can affect the result of an election (Blondel 1981, p. 6).

Politics is peculiar . . . in that straightforward 'accidents' uncannily erupt on the political scene. Accidents are those non-political or tenuously political events which come to have a sharp political impact. A natural calamity, such as an earthquake or landslide, the illness or the death of a leader may produce major ripples. Human error, a rail or ship disaster, for instance, may surge on the political scene. Thus the 'normal' course of affairs may be upset because an event, which leaders could not predict or avoid – or could avoid only at considerable financial cost – largely because it had no political significance, creates a new situation which upsets calculations and modifies the equilibrium of forces. (Blondel 1981, p. 7)

Now, this is not to say that the meaning of political events is objectively contained in the events themselves – precisely the contrary. There is no inherent political meaning in a sudden death or a rail disaster. The problem is not simply that events are unforeseen, but their political significance is unpredictable. The question is whether or not governments and politicians can steer a safe path through events; whether they can remain in command of the situation and make the most of a good crisis; or whether, like Callaghan, they come to appear ‘no longer able to dominate events’ (Blondel 1981, p. 4).

Neither is this to say that events are random. Events have causes, but those causes may remain unknown, unseen and multiple. And as Blondel argues, with the passing of time, events can be seen in perspective and perhaps as part of an inevitable trend (Blondel 1981, pp. 7–8). Callaghan would have fallen sooner or later. And the impact of events may not be as great as initially thought: ‘It is rare for the whole political system, or even governmental policies to be markedly altered in view of an “accident”’ (Blondel 1981, p. 7). But trends lead to outcomes, and while trends can be examined, mapped and modelled, ‘the process in which *a trend is converted into an outcome*’ is more mysterious: ‘it is *one outcome or another* which occurs in politics, not a trend . . . by its very nature, the analysis of trends cannot lead to a precise prediction’ (Blondel 1981, p. 13) [his italics].

This understanding of events does not fit the trope offered to us by terrorism and security studies. Unlike traditional strategic studies with its emphasis on states and the use of military force, there is no cold hard meaning contained in any particular event (Buzan and Hansen 2009, p. 83). But unlike in securitisation theory, actors do not construct the meaning of events either, try as they might. The events that take on the most dramatic political significance seem to come from nowhere to exceed the predictive, preparatory and prophylactic capabilities of politicians. And even when events seem part of an analysable trend, the outcomes of those trends are fundamentally uncertain and can flip on the tiniest of margins. Certainly, governments’ successful or unsuccessful attempts to ‘spin’ the meaning of events may have a large bearing on whether they are able to appear to remain in command, but under this alternative ontology the meaning and construction of events is not dominated by political elites. It is not their prerogative. Rather, events appear to take on a life of their own.

Adopting a Machiavellian political ontology based on the priority of events and the inevitable but non-catastrophic fall of governments gives an interesting complexion to the question of security politics. From this perspective, there is no difference between security events and other events. The question is not which unforeseen, contingent events will prove to be exceptional, existential security threats (the Schmittian formulation), but rather which events will be politically significant. This is equally unknown and contingent, but it is defined not by existential threat, but by its impact on the life of a government or the career of a politician. From the perspective of political survival, there is no difference between a terrorist attack, an economic crisis or a political scandal. Of course, there may be different ways of dealing with them politically and governmentally, but the *political* stakes are the same.

If there is no political distinction between security events and other events, then this dissolves the problematic separation of politics and security discussed earlier. Security is not defined by its separation from normal politics, as in the Copenhagen School mould. If we rethink the stakes as political and not existential, then this challenges the primacy of the classic sovereign security trope. From the perspective of politics and what is at stake for politicians, security politics is no different to politics in general. A Machiavellian ontology reflects this different tradition regarding the role of events in politics.

Conclusions

On the basis of the argument presented here, one should be prompted to stop and think hard before adopting the naturalised disciplinary assumptions that seem to accompany existing analyses of terrorism and security. This article is thus intended as a way of rethinking the exclusions of scholarly approaches to terrorism and security. While this scholarship is broad and diverse, it seems to suffer from certain preoccupations to the exclusion of others; at stake is either the nature of threats or the nature of the sovereign, executive or governmental power that defines and handles threats. This trope suffers from four problems: first, it risks taking security discourses at face value when there might be other logics at work; second, it does not encompass the empirical breadth of politics as it relates to security; third, it risks reifying a certain understanding of political power at the expense of a more plural understanding of politics; and fourth, it risks allowing a particular object – which I have called the classic sovereign security trope – to define the discipline itself. These points raise a further question: to what extent do terrorism and security studies require security to be ‘special’ in order to justify their own importance?

We can consider this problem by turning to Michel Foucault. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault rejects the idea that discourses are constituted by a common object (Foucault 2002, pp. 35–36). This means, for example, that just because there is a large discourse about madness, this does not mean that madness is a single unified thing. Rather, madness is understood so differently from the perspective of different times and positions in the discourse on madness that it makes no sense to consider it as an objective thing (Foucault 2006). This is why he later said that his method consisted in saying

Let’s suppose that madness does not exist. If we suppose that it does not exist, then what can history make of these different events and practices which are apparently organised around something that is supposed to be madness? (Foucault 2008, pp. 20–21)

To translate this to the problem of security, we can ask whether terrorism and security studies are constituted by the assumption of a common object: the classic sovereign security trope. However, this article has shown that from a different perspective – that of politics as an activity – this object looks different to the extent that it is not the same thing. If we rethink security in terms of *politically salient events* as suggested here, security loses its specialness as an object. This is a way of asking ‘what if security does not exist?’ Thus, in answer to my initial question, this is what it would mean to rethink security from the perspective of politics.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for comments on the article by Philippe Bonditti, Victoria Loughlan, Richard Jackson, my colleagues in the IR Research Group at the University of Edinburgh and the two anonymous reviewers for CST.

Note

1. Hansard HC vol 505, cols 914–926 (10 February 2010), David Miliband.

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